



Washington State Senate

1998 Session Report



Senator Bob Oke

**P.O. Box 186
Port Orchard, WA 98366**

**Phone: (253) 851-3441
1-800-782-2955**

**Committee Assignments:
Chair, Natural Resources &
Parks
Agriculture & Environment
Transportation**

Dear Friend:

I am happy to report that the 1998 Legislative session ended on time and with a number of significant accomplishments. Among them are tough, new laws to deal with drunk drivers; property tax relief for senior citizens; a new approach to transportation funding and planning; a grant program to improve the reading skills of young children; and a state spending plan that is well below the voter-imposed spending limit.

If you have any questions about the issues in this newsletter, or other issues related to state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. I very much enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to serve you in the State Senate.

You can get a message to me by calling the toll-free legislative hotline at 1-800-562-6000. You can also call my district office directly at 253-851-3441 or toll-free at 1-800-782-2955. My Legislative Assistant, Sandy Johnson, will be happy to help you or get a message to me.

My district office is located in Gig Harbor at 3123 56th Street NW, Suite 16. My district mailing address is P.O. Box 186, Port Orchard WA 98366.

If you have access to the Internet, you can email me at: senate_26@leg.wa.gov and you can visit the Senate Home Page at <http://www.leg.wa.gov/www/senate.htm>.

I want to thank all of you who contacted me during the legislative session. Your ideas and opinions about legislation help me to better represent our community.

Sincerely,

BOB OKE, State Senator

Our children and their education

Of concern to all of us is the education of our children and grandchildren. Part of helping our teachers do the best job possible, is making sure school buildings are safe and adequate. After voters in a school district approve a school bond issue, the construction projects go on a list for state matching dollars. The two-year budget we adopted last year provided state matching dollars for all the school construction projects on the list. State money to lower class sizes cannot be used by schools that have no extra classroom space.

Last year we also included in the budget \$50 million in grant dollars for school districts to improve learning in reading, writing, math and communications. This year, in the supplemental budget, we added another \$17 million for grants specifically to improve reading skills in young children. As every parent knows, the foundation of a good reader is laid before the third grade.

The Successful Readers Act that is supported by this \$17 million provides grants for teachers in kindergarten through the second grade for training and instructional materials in the phonics method (\$9 million). The remaining \$8 million supports a grant program for training elementary school teachers in the use of volunteer tutors and mentors for reading and summer school. *(continued on next page)*





(Our children/education *continued from previous page*)

Also in the supplemental budget, we provided \$6.9 million to complete phase 2 of the system that will connect our public schools and colleges using television monitors, high-speed telephone lines, video cameras, computer networks, and microwaves as teaching tools. This is a very exciting adventure and so very necessary in this daily-changing technological world.

Another exciting part of our educational funding package this year is money to begin the operation of a program to allow parents to buy today, at today's prices, college tuition units for their children's education in the future. This \$1.3 million will make the program operational by this fall. I am very committed to adopting a tuition policy that keeps a college education affordable for children of middle income families, but even with such a policy, inflation will cause tuition to rise. This pre-paid tuition program will allow children to go to college many years in the future at today's tuition rates.

Earlier this year, I answered several letters from junior high school students who wrote to me about their school district's levy failure. I believe they wrote to me because I have sponsored legislation to help school districts win community approval of their local funding needs. In these letters, I meant to help these young people understand how folks in our community might react when some youths don't do well in school or perhaps get into trouble. Unfortunately, my message was not understood the way I intended. I felt very bad about this. So, after session I had the opportunity to meet with these students in their classroom and I now believe they realize I intended only to encourage them to be good citizens.



Making our streets and communities safer

People who get behind the wheel of their cars after drinking or using drugs are a tragedy in the making — for themselves, their families and for innocent strangers.

The number one goal of our state MADD chapter and the national MADD organization this year was to lower the blood alcohol level at which a person is considered legally drunk. We did this. We lowered that level from .10 to .08. The higher the blood alcohol level, the more dangerous the driver. Everyone is impaired at .10, but because this was right at the "threshold" of being legally drunk, many .10 DUI arrests were plea bargained down to reckless driving. By lowering the legal level, we will reduce this plea bargaining and increase DUI convictions.

We also increased fines and jail time for repeat offenders; we limited "deferred prosecution," which is counseling instead of jail time, to once in a lifetime; we provided for a 90-day administrative license revocation for first-time DUI offenders; and we authorized the courts to impose the use of an ignition interlock device, at the car owner's expense, to prevent a drunk person from starting his or her car.

- Another bill we approved will increase the fee by \$150 for renewing a license suspended for drunk driving. Revenues from this new fee will pay for increased drunk driving enforcement to help protect our families.
- The toughest measure we passed permanently revokes the driver's license of a person on his or her third DUI conviction in a seven-year period.
- We also authorized law enforcement to impound the vehicle of a person caught driving with a suspended or revoked license.

Local criminal justice funding

A section of HB 2894, the transportation funding plan approved this year, enhances state support for local criminal justice costs. Kitsap County is designated to receive a total of \$330,000 which includes specific appropriations for Bremerton and Port Orchard. Pierce County is designated to receive a total of \$2.4 million which includes specific appropriations for Gig Harbor and Tacoma. HB 2894 will be on the November ballot as Referendum 49.

Harsher penalties for drug dealers who prey on children

The governor signed into law my bill to increase the jail time and fines for drug dealers who manufacture and sell amphetamines (speed). I believe very strongly that we need to make drug dealing a risky and costly venture for those who prey on our children.

Helping seniors stay in their homes

One of the hardest taxes for senior citizens to keep up with is the property tax. Many seniors live in homes they bought when their children were small, but the value has so increased in the last 30 or more years, that the property taxes are now beyond their means. Fortunately, some years ago, voters gave the Legislature the authority to implement senior citizen property tax exemptions from **special levies**. This year, I sponsored a measure to increase the allowable income level for senior citizens and disabled retirees to qualify for a property tax break.

Currently the allowable annual income is \$28,000. The new level will be \$30,000. The allowable income for such persons to qualify for a partial exemption from **regular levies** has also been increased. These new levels of allowable income will apply to taxes payable in 1999 and thereafter.

The measure we approved also would have allowed seniors and disabled retirees to deduct the cost of health care insurance premiums and to exclude veterans benefits for service connected disabilities before figuring their annual household income. Unfortunately, these new deductions were vetoed by the governor.

For more information on property tax exemptions and deferrals, seniors in Pierce County can call the assessor's office at 253-798-6111; seniors in Kitsap County can call the assessor's office at 360-895-4904.



Cutting the costs of the Narrows Bridge project

Over the last two years I have worked very hard to reduce the costs of the Narrows Bridge project. I think we can all agree that if there is a new bridge, the tolls must be as low as possible. Last year I got a bill through the Senate that would have reduced the costs of the project by about \$50 million. Unfortunately, this bill did not pass the House of Representatives. This year, Representative Tom Huff and I teamed up to get a bill through both the House and Senate. Our efforts were successful. We won a cost-reduction package with a net present value of \$73 million for the bridge project.

I also remain committed to my efforts to win federal funding for the project to further cut costs and reduce the amount of tolls. I believe we are in a good position to obtain federal dollars because the Narrows Bridge connects Puget Sound's military installations.

I've worked hard on this issue because I believe it is critical that everything that can be done gets done before the November vote.

Respecting the citizens' spending limit

In 1993, you and your neighbors voted to limit how much your state government can spend. This limit is very reasonable and is tied to the state's population growth and the rate of inflation. Last year, my colleagues and I adopted a two-year budget that is \$67 million below the spending limit. This year, savings from lower welfare case loads and lower K-12 enrollment allowed us to adopt a

supplemental budget with the enhancements I mention in this report, and still stay \$67 million below the spending limit. We also now have \$778 million in reserves in case of an economic downturn.

Last year we cut everyone's property taxes with Referendum 47, a measure which I supported and voted to send to the ballot and voters approved. This year, our state's strong economy enabled us to cut taxes in ways that will benefit families by encouraging the development of new jobs. When we are fair to Washington's businesses and industries, they reward us by hiring more people. A regular paycheck gives people self-esteem and provides security for a family.

Fixing roads without increasing gas tax

There will be a proposal (HB 2894/Referendum 49) on the ballot this November to finance road construction with money the state already receives from the vehicle license tab. The proposal allows the state to shift the license tab tax money out of the general fund and put it into the transportation fund without affecting the spending limit. It also cuts the license tab tax by \$30 per vehicle.

In addition, part of HB 2894 provides about \$1 million for a study to find a long-term funding solution for highway construction and safety improvements.



Cracking down on those who misuse disabled parking spaces

I am very happy to report that an issue brought to me by a constituent won approval this year. It is very disheartening to see people park illegally in parking spots reserved for disabled drivers and to know that people fraudulently obtain disabled parking permits. The measure we approved this year tightens controls on disabled parking permits to prevent fraud. The new law also increases penalties for those who park illegally in disabled parking spaces. For example, people who qualify for a disabled parking permit will soon have to carry picture identification. This new law also allows local law enforcement agencies to appoint volunteer enforcement teams to issue citations.

This new ferry service from Southworth to Seattle will also be a big plus for all peninsula residents. No longer will a trip to Seattle for a ball game or other family activity require the long, congested car trip over the Narrows Bridge and up I-5. A pleasant ferry ride will get you to Seattle in less than 30 minutes.

In addition to the passage of this bill to build two new ferries for the Southworth to Seattle run, our efforts this year brought about some immediate results. The Tillicum vessel, which normally only serves the Southworth to Seattle run in the summer, will now operate year-round. We also won the permanent placement of the Hiya vessel on this run to operate 16 hours per day, 5 days per week, between Southworth and Vashon.



Senator Oke accepts the pen from Governor Locke at the bill signing ceremony for the Southworth Ferry bill on March 27, 1998. Scott Rhodes, a Port Orchard resident and daily Southworth ferry rider who requested the bill be introduced, is standing on the right of the governor between Representative Tom Huff and Senator Betti Sheldon. Representative Karen Schmidt is standing on the left of Senator Oke.

Better Southworth ferry service

I am very pleased to report that the governor signed my bill to authorize the construction of two new passenger-only ferries and the necessary terminal and docking facilities for the Southworth to Seattle route. This is only the first step, but I will work very hard to secure the needed funding.



Helping teens not to smoke

Under current law, it is illegal for a minor to purchase cigarettes or other tobacco products. Teens who buy cigarettes are guilty of a civil infraction with a fine of up to \$50, plus the courts have the option of requiring a teen to attend a smoking cessation program. However, there is no law prohibiting teens from having and smoking cigarettes. Having kids light up across the street from school grounds has been an ongoing concern of both school and health officials. This year, we approved a measure that makes it a civil infraction for teens to possess tobacco products and gives the courts the option of adding four hours of community service to current penalties.



Saving our salmon

The upper Columbia River steelhead is already listed as endangered and the Snake River steelhead is already listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. In March, we got word that the Puget Sound Chinook salmon is being proposed for the threatened list. The state has about one year to prove we can save the salmon ourselves or the federal government will step in. If this happens, it will be the first time this powerful law is focused on such a vast urban area. According to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, protection for salmon or steelhead now covers about three-quarters of the state. The state's first steps to save our salmon, which I support, invests \$24 million in restoration projects, expansion of existing programs, and long-term planning, assessment and coordination.

There is no question that we have a very big job on our hands and that we have yet to feel the full impact of what saving the salmon will mean to our state and its people. I will work to find ways to protect our wild salmon stocks without causing an undue burden on property owners.

Marking Chinook salmon

The state already marks hatchery-produced coho salmon so that fishers will recognize and release wild coho. My bill, which was approved this year, will require that hatchery-produced Chinook salmon also be marked so that wild Chinook can be released and allowed to return upstream to spawn. With the wild Chinook now proposed for the ESA threatened list, fishers will not be able to fish for any Chinook unless they can distinguish the hatchery fish from the wild stocks. Chinook salmon fishing will end without hatchery fish marking.

Fish and wildlife licensing and enforcement

Two fish and wildlife bills important to sportsmen and women were signed into law this year. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity as chair of the Natural Resources and Parks Committee to work these issues and sponsor the legislation.

- SB 6328 consolidates the enforcement codes of the former Department of Wildlife and the former Department of Fisheries into one enforcement code. As you may recall, the two departments have been merged into a single agency, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. The two codes were overlapping and confusing. The single code will help our enforcement officers protect our natural resources for us.
- SB 6330 creates less expensive fishing and hunting license packages, makes licenses sturdier and easier to handle, and streamlines the licensing process.

The 1998 session was the best session that the people of the 26th District have had since I was first elected to the Senate eight years ago. It was a good session for Washington state, but particularly for the 26th District. Thank you for allowing me to serve you.

BULK RATE
US Postage
PAID
Olympia, WA
Permit #133

Senator Bob Oke
PO Box 40482
Olympia, WA 98504-0482